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ABSTRACT

In 1642, the Massachusetts General Court required parents to attend to the education of their children. Since then, the visions of the early colonists have fallen victim to rapid population expansion and a highly specialized technology, and the close ties between the school and the community have been seriously weakened. Recent reports, however, have called for new links to be built between the schools and the communities they serve. Though these reports were aimed at large urban centers, they are equally important for rural schools and communities. The basic premise of this paper is that and educational change that requires citizens' understanding and support; parent cooperation; or new roles or relationships for students, teachers, administrators, school boards, or parents must begin with and use a process that involves all such users in selecting, implementing, and evaluating that change. Examining barriers to citizen involvement, the paper concludes that many rural citizens feel left out of their local school decision making processes and that a new promising approach of involving citizens exists. Finally, the paper suggests that a new support mechanism be made that will make available a planned change model for interested school districts, regional service agencies, and State Departments of Education. (KM)

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Involving Rural People in Rural Education*

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A. PURPOSE OF INVOLVEMENT

Massachusetts was a leader in the development of the public school system. In 1642, the General Court required parents to attend to the education of their children, with penalties for noncompliance. From the beginning the citizens of Massachusetts felt strongly about the necessity for public, citizen control of the schools, as free as possible from political influence, in order to have them responsive to change. They believed in the idea of governing with the consent of the governed. These precepts were not brought over from England, but originated with the colonists. In fact, they were highly related to their purpose in coming over in the first place. In the early days it was relatively easy to have a close relationship between the people and the schools. Each community had an intimate and direct control over all its social services, including education. The people had no doubt that the schools truly belonged to them and that they were teaching children reading and writing skills and reinforcing the ideals and standards that were valued by the community.

Since then, the vision of the early colonists has fallen victim of rapid population expansion and a highly specialized technology. The close tie between the school and the community has been seriously weakened. Recently, the Kerner Commission Report[1] called for "extraordinary efforts to

1. Report of the National Advisory Commission and Civil Disorder. (known as the Kerner Commission Report.)

reconnect parents with the schools...." and for new links to be built between the schools and the communities they serve. "The objective must be to make public education more relevant and responsive to the community and to increase support for it in the home." It further states that "specific mechanisms for seeking the advice and consultation of students and parents such as parent advisory councils or other similar bodies should be adopted."

The 1966 New York state legislature, as a precondition for increased state financial aid for New York schools, requested a plan which would "afford members of the community an opportunity to take a more active and meaningful role in the development of educational policy related to the diverse needs and aspirations of the community."

The now famous Coleman Report in 1966[2] added another dimension to the need for involvement in the schools when it stated "a sense of control of one's destiny was more highly related to achievement than any other factor in the student's background of school."

Though these reports (which ignored rural schools) were primarily aimed at schools in large urban centers, they are equally important and timely for rural schools and communities. "Citizen participation" and "citizen involvement" are hot

2. U. S. Department of Welfare. Equality of Educational Opportunity (known as the Coleman Report.) Chief investigator was James S. Coleman. 1966

topics of discussion, if not controversial among rural educators, parents and students too!

The basic premise of this paper is that any educational change that requires citizen understanding and support, that requires parent cooperation or that implies new roles or new relationships for students, teachers, administrators, school boards or parents, must begin with and use a process that involves all such users in selecting, implementing and evaluating that change. This is necessary in order to create that "sense of control of one's destiny" and to "seek advice and consultation from a wider group in order to help make education more relevant and responsive to the community."

B. BARRIERS TO CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

A long, held idea is that participation of the governed in their government is, in theory, the cornerstone of democracy....it is vigorously applauded by almost everyone.... A bit like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is so good for you. However, student riots and minority efforts expressing the bitterness and powerlessness they feel in being left out has been well documented during the past decade.

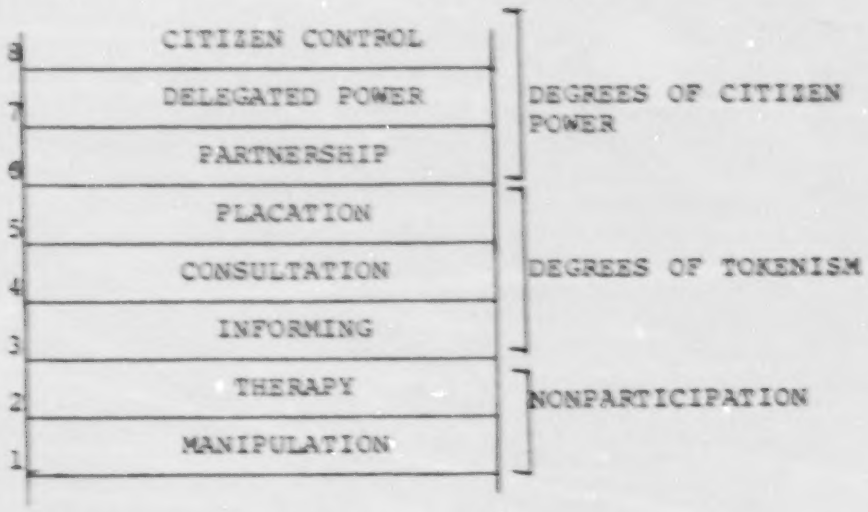
Though the nature of the controversy has not dominated the headlines of our newspapers or been the frequent target of strikes or riots, there lurks a certain uneasiness among

rural (and urban and suburban) community residents that manifests itself in many forms throughout the country. Small pressure groups are forming asking school boards disturbing questions about educational progress. Alternatives to regular public school fare are often suggested. Routine bonding and millage requests for school maintenance and operation are frequently being denied by voters. Many other factors illustrating community discontent and unrest could be cited. It is not the intention of this writer to insist that we equate all of these activities directly to the fact that citizens have not and are not being involved in their schools but rather to have us realize that they may represent symptoms of larger, more complex problems. This paper will make the assumption that one of the basic reasons for the disillusionment with present educational practice is that citizens feel left out and in a variety of ways calling for a "piece of the action."

Many reasons may be cited which may cause citizens to feel "left out" of their schools including such things as the increasing professionalism of educators (specialists), authoritarian school boards and/or administrators, increased complexity of teaching and learning, the divorce of learning from life, etc. Another factor, which this paper wishes to emphasize, is the past and present history of citizen involvement in their schools.

C. ASSESSING CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT EFFORTS

Sherry Arnstein[3] has offered an interesting, if not controversial, means of analyzing citizen participation in federal social programs such as urban renewal, antipoverty and Model Cities. It appears useful for looking at involvement of citizens in education within rural communities. She devised a typology of eight levels arranged in a ladder pattern with each rung corresponding to the extent of citizens' power in determining the end product.



The bottom rungs of the ladder are (1) Manipulation and (2) Therapy. These two rungs describe levels of "nonparticipation" that have been contrived to substitute for genuine participation. Their real objective is not to enable people to participate but to enable power holders to "educate" or

3. A Ladder of Citizen Participation, Sherry Arnstein, American Institute of Planners Journal, July 1969; pp 216-24.

'cure' the participants. Rungs (3), (4) and (5) indicate levels of "tokenism" that allow citizens to hear and to have a voice. There is, however, no assurance that these views will be heeded. At these levels there is no followthrough, no "muscle" and therefore no certainty of changing the status quo. Rung (5) is a higher level but only allows citizens to advise, powerholders continue the right to decide.

Further up the ladder are levels of citizen power which increase the degree of decision making ability. Citizens can enter into a (6) Partnership that enables them to negotiate and engage in tradeoffs with traditional powerholders. At the top of the ladder (7) Delegated Power and (8) Citizen Control, citizens have decision making and full managerial power.

Arnstein cautions that the eight rungs on the ladder may be too simplistic since in real life there might be 15 rungs with less sharp distinctions among them. For the purposes of this paper, Arnstein's ladder is used as a general reference to denote the existence of varying levels of citizens participation in a community's educational decision making. It aids our attempt to analyze past and present activities which have as their avowed purpose the community involvement and participation of citizens in determining the end products of education.

While the early citizens of Massachusetts were able to exercise high levels of citizen power over their schools (Arnstein's levels 6, 7 and 8) such is not the typical case today. Many citizens feel estranged from the very institution that was founded to serve them. This alienation is not limited to minority groups who have historically been outside of educational decision making processes but is also common among middle class whites in many rural communities of our country. This writer suggests the premise that much of the so called apathy, nonparticipation or unwillingness to become involved stems from the low level (Arnstein's 1 and 2 levels) of citizen participation available in many school/communities. Stating it bluntly, the educator says: "we are the professionals who are trained and know how to run the schools! Citizens (esp. parents) stay home, don't call us, we'll call you, if we need you! Pay your taxes! Don't gripe! If we need more money to run the schools, pay that too! After all, we are educating your children. Don't question us, we know what we are doing!" This overstated position, illustrates the extent to which schools have become selfserving institutions and provides the basis for that "left out" feeling that many people are expressing today. If we examine much of what is done in the name of citizen participation in schools today, we find that its substance lies on the low rungs of Arnstein's ladder.

Though we have become a much larger and highly complex nation since those early days in Massachusetts; though

teaching and learning and school administration has become more of a discipline; ways must be found to make schools more responsive to the views, aspirations and needs of the citizen! There are means to accomplish this task! There are people willing to attempt it!

D. ONE APPROACH TO INVOLVING RURAL CITIZENS

The Rural Education Program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) in Portland, Oregon (a private, nonprofit organization), has been working for the past several years on a new model for citizen involvement in rural communities. The plan is aimed at breaking down the wall that typically separates school from community. It emphasizes local people gaining increased skills in communication, problem solving and decision making while being supported in planned change by an external process person (change agent).

The rural model draws on the concept of several change process models and involves a variety of strategies which have been developed by many scholars and practitioners of community change. Among them are:

1. Action Research Models

Kurt Lewin first expressed his belief in the idea that change would take place more effectively if persons and groups who need to be involved in the change were to be involved earlier in the process of diagnostic data collection and analysis. He noted that involvement in the diagnosis and

clarifying what it meant had an important psychological impact on helping individuals understand their own resistance to change and help them gain commitment for carrying through, on the implications of their findings.

2. Research and Development Models

The Research and Development strategy emphasizes the testing and trying out of new methods and procedures using feedback (evaluative) data to help improve them for use a second time. Procedures move through design and prototype stages and into the final product during a field test. Afterward, they are ready for broad dissemination.

3. Community Development Models

This model recognizes that a community is made up of a variety of "peer systems," each one is interested in pursuing its own thing. In order to accomplish significant changes in the community there needs to be greater recognition of interdependence, more open and effective communication and more collaboration among the power figures and groups of the community. Procedures used identify these community leaders and work with them in order to bring about change.

4. Organizational Development Models

Organizational development places its emphasis within specific agency and/or organization in a community. An institution like a school, is viewed as an important problem solving subpart of the community, with varying capacities for

decision making, action taking, planning and evaluating their actions. An improved working climate or atmosphere for employees is a major goal of this model.

5. Problem Solving Models

The steps and techniques of problem solving are used in this model for arriving at successful action plans and decisions. Skill training and obtaining feedback are also important parts of it. Groups are taught skills in using these steps to help them develop efficiency in working toward their goals.

6. The Laboratory Educational Model (NTL)

Process analysis is a major focus of this model in which (a) individuals are helped to become more aware of and find ways of increasing their own potentials, and (b) small groups are aided in reviewing their own communication processes or power conflicts in order to become more productive and effective. Intergroup and process analyses are balanced with real (usually back home) learning tasks. The Laboratory method also sees as important the uses of information resources that are timed to aid the problem solving capability of the group.

Briefly, each of these models contributes to a set of principles upon which the Rural Education's change model is based. More specifically, at the community level citizens, school boards, administrators, teachers and students are

consulted prior to the use of the planned change model. Every attempt is made to have all persons to be affected by any change involved from the very beginning. Emphasis throughout the process is on doing and/or learning to do for oneself. A widely representative school/community group, for example, learns to: design, implement a community survey of educational need, analyze the results, set priorities for action, seek alternatives, plan for implementing (help staff to do so) and to evaluate.

The school/community group is taught easy to use methods for solving problems and getting decisions made. Skills in communication are also enhanced while real life problems are being considered.

Community development strategies have been adopted using sociometric techiques which ask a community to identify their spokespeople or "opinion leaders." Methods of informal communciation are used to assure the larger community to receive frequent and accurate information regarding the functioning and plans of the group.

As the school/community group develops into a productive organization, attention is directed to its own internal effectiveness. Thus, organizational development procedures are employed to help the group to be a growing, learning and self-renewing organization.

The steps in problem solving are also introduced by the external process facilitator. This is done when the group begins to attack educational problems within the community. One very useful tool for engaging in these steps has been force field analysis.

Procedures most closely associated with the NTL Laboratory Model are alo frequently practiced in the rural change model. Helping community leaders plan and conduct meetings, deal with conflict, overcome communication problems, use simulations, are all examples of techniques derived from the Laboratory Model.

Admittedly, none of these practices is new. Perhaps what is different in the Rural Education Program (REP) Model, is putting such a wide variety of strategies and techniques together to help local community people learn to do these things for themselves and regain a renewed sense of control of their own school (destiny).

E. PLANS FOR DISSEMINATING THE PLAN

New role behaviors need understanding and support if they are to survive and become widely practiced. Hard lessons from the past have shown us that, for example, to train a teacher in New Math concepts and teaching strategies and expect him or her to function in the old, unchanged environment was to doom her or him to frustration and heightened anxiety. Without support from the principal, other teachers and administrators, the new role behavior, could not succeed.

The Rural Education Program has faced this fact and is developing an interesting marriage or organizational and community development strategies and techniques. The external change agent is housed in a regional service agency such as a BOCES or Intermediate School District from which he/she provides technical assistance (process facilitation) to two or three local school districts. While the change agent engages these districts in the planned change process, he/she is being trained to carry out this new role. Other members of the support agency, including the administrators, are also undergoing training in understanding and learning how to support the new demands which local schools place on the support agency as a result of their involvement in the process by the change agent. Such activities include learning how to serve as a process consultant rather than expert or supervisor. Thus, the change agent's new role and behavior will come to be understood, valued and supported by the staff as well as by the employing agency.

Also, recognizing that regional service agencies are often tied directly or very closely to State Departments of Education, the Rural Education Program plans to work with that agency to help it understand and support the new services being performed by the regional agency. Vital to this activity is the training of State Department specialists (supervisors of math, science, etc.) to be process helpers (consultants) when answering requests for help by the regional service agency and/or the local school districts.

Thus a whole new support system will be developed to aid the new role of the change agent within the regional service agency and the new expectancies that the regional service agency will expect from the State level. Early and continuing involvement of all persons affected by these changes is also a key factor in the success of this plan.

After the pilot operation of the system and as it proves successful, expansion of the plan both within the regional service agency and to others in a state is envisioned. The State Department will be expected to employ appropriate staff to train change agents and assist regional organizations, their organizational development needs. A college, university, or Laboratory will provide the technical assistance needed by the State Department for training and its own organizational development needs.

F. SUMMARY

This paper has attempted to provide a basis for believing that citizen involvement in education is an imperative of our day; that we need to discover ways of returning the power to citizens in order to have schools become, once again, responsive to their views, aspirations and needs. A basic premise has been that recent and present citizen involvement strategies have in effect, been nonparticipatory and represent only varying degrees of tokenism. This writer believes that many rural citizens feel left out of their local school decision making processes and that a new, promising approach

of involving citizens exists. Finally, this paper suggests a new support mechanism be made that will make available a planned change model available for use by interested school districts, regional service agencies and State Departments of Education.